

Talking Points: *Why teach with a theme?*

Every year National History Day frames students' research within a historical theme. The theme is chosen for the broad application to world, national or state history and its relevance to ancient history or to the more recent past. This year's theme is *Conflict and Compromise in History*.

The intentional selection of the theme for National History Day is to provide an opportunity for students to push past the antiquated view of history as mere facts and dates and drill down into historical content to develop perspective and understanding.

Students sometimes learn history fast and without meaning. This happens for two main reasons. The first is the current educational climate that emphasizes coverage of content and secondly, the vastness of the discipline. Conceivably, to study history is to study everything since the beginning of time. Class design is often determined by time periods and approached chronologically: Revolutionary War, Westward Movement, Reconstruction or 20th century American History. Presenting history through chronology, without a guiding framework or theme, abandons students to isolated pieces of historical information.

The NHD theme provides a focused way to increase student's historical understanding by developing a lens to read history, an organizational structure that helps students place information in the correct context, and, finally, the ability to see connections over time.

Providing Focus

The discipline of history is so large that it incorporates all other disciplines; the history of art, the history of literature, the history of science, the history of math and all other social sciences. The vastness of the content is overwhelming. For an adolescent who is just at the beginning stages of struggling with higher level thinking skills, the task of learning history seems insurmountable. But, by highlighting the National Day History theme, students are given a consistent focus for the year.

An additional benefit is that teaching with a theme can increase reading comprehension. Reading research has shown that comprehension increases when students are reading with a purpose. When students are reading and thinking about the theme, they are actively reading for events, people or ideas that are examples of *Conflict and Compromise in History*. A theme redefines how history is learned. Instead of concentrating on the whole century or large topic, students are invited to stop and analyze the smaller event in relation to the whole. Teaching with a theme ensures that students are not overwhelmed with the sheer vastness of the discipline but are invited to look deeply instead.